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ABSTRACT

Writers of all ages and abilities come to the act of writing with three critical needs: (1) they need a commitment of time; (2) they need ownership over their topics; and, most important, (3) they need a response to their personal revelations. Sharing and responding to student writing can take place in writers' circles and writers' conferences. In a writers circle, students gather in small groups and share their writing processes or products and receive responses from their peers. The most effective writers conferences are brief and focus on what the writers are communicating rather than on the perceptions of the respondent. The writer is the informant as open-ended questions are used to expand or to focus the conference. (RS)

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Whole Language

Writing: The Critical Response

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Writers of all ages and abilities, including language-disabled writers, come to the act of writing with three critical needs. They need a commitment of time — predictable blocks of time to practice, to read, to share their pictures and printed words. They need ownership over their topics, a chance to feel a sense of control over their own ideas. This means being freed from the restrictions of conventions as the primary focus rather than the tools of writing. Most important, they need a response to their personal revelations. Writing unleashes unseen and unspoken bits of a writer's inner being. The writer deserves the sense of an active audience who receives those declared thoughts and recognizes the voice of the writer. As Francois Mauriac has pointed out, "Each of us is like a desert, and a literary work is like a cry from the desert, or like a pigeon let loose with a message in its claws, or like a bottle thrown into the sea. The point is: to be heard — even if by one single person" (Calkings, 1986).

Calkins also notes that the role of a teacher of writing is that of a listener, a coach. The whole writing classroom pivots around vital interactive patterns, not only between the writers and the teacher, but also among the writers themselves. This sharing of writing responses from the audience as the writers become readers, is no more linear than the stages of the writing process are linear. It occurs at different developmental levels at different stages and in different ways. In all settings and situations the writer is the informant with personal thoughts to share.

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Methods of Sharing/Responding to Writing

Sharing and responding to writing can take place in two formats within the stages of the writing process: *writers' circles* and *writers' conferences*. Some writers; circles/conferences help the writers to discover topics, to begin writing, or to add focus to what it's really about. Others occur as writers discover their own voices and are able to talk about the writing. Key to both are strategies for effective questioning that leave the writer in control. "Ordinarily it is the teacher who knows, the student who learns. Here it is the student who knows, or should, and the teacher who learns, or tries to" (MacLeish, 1959). The distinction between the two formats hinges on who is involved in the interaction more than the nature of the exchange.

Using the Writers' Circle

Sharing the writing experience and responding to it begins, even with beginning writers, in the pre-writing stage. Yet beginning writers are not necessarily *young* writers. The range of successful experiences with writing can be broad even among adult learners. Developing, as well as experienced writers, use interactive response as a tool for topic generation. They may simply discuss possible topics with a peer or share some "rush writing" with a willing audience. Writers less familiar with strategies for finding

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WRITERS' CIRCLE

1. **Share Meetings.** The whole class meets and several writers read, one at a time. After each writer reads, he/she calls on the listeners for their responses/questions. The teacher encourages the students to follow a line of questioning.
2. **Writers' Circle.** Writers are divided into clusters of three or four. The clusters meet simultaneously with writers within each cluster taking turns reading their writing aloud and receiving responses from the others in their circle.
3. **Quiet Share.** Writers meet in either large or small writers circles to share their process rather than their products.
4. **Focused Share.** The entire class meets together and shares a specific aspect of their writing: their leads, their titles, their main idea, etc.
5. **Process Share.** Writers meet in either large or small circles to share their process rather than their products. Discussion centers on questions such as: What kinds of problems do you have writing? How do you find a topic? What changes did you make between the first and final drafts? How did you go about making them?
6. **Giving Writing.** Writers may read their piece aloud or give copies to friends, family, or the class library — but the purpose is to give and to CELEBRATE that giving.

(Adapted from Calkins, 1983)

a topic can use a technique known as Think-Link.

Think-Link begins with a whole group sharing a theme. The teacher asks the writers to *think for one minute* about possible topics. Next the writers turn to peers and discuss with the peers their ideas. Besides the generation of topics this step produces, it also validates for the writers the *power of the peer dyad.* The writing classroom is a community of language learners focused on mutual growth. Teachers who structure writing experiences so their students learn from each other as well as the teacher provide their writers with a life-long board of editors.

After dialoguing in peer dyads the writers return to the large writers' circle to share the thoughts of their interactions. Conclusions may be voiced or illustrated in topic lists or webbings/mappings of key words. The commonality of the theme is expanded into individual topic selections which still leave the writers in control of the final idea.

Using the Writers' Conference

Writing conferences, another way of responding to writing, often begin with the experience of a writing conference rather than observing the format. The most effective ones are brief and focus on the what the writers are communicating rather than the perceptions of the respondent. The writer continues to be the informant as open-ended questions are used to expand or to focus the conference. Key questions *. . . tell me about . . . what are you writing about . . . read me what you have written . . . how is it going . . . I see you're (writing, drawing) about . . .* are both critical to the process and the most difficult technique for teachers to acquire. It's much easier for many teachers to take ownership of the writing . . . *you should have said . . . perhaps if you said . . . this doesn't make any sense . . . proofread this . . .* than it is to perform the act of faith that is the heart of teaching writing.

"I do hear voices from my students they have never heard from themselves. I find they are authorities on subjects they think ordinary . . . Teaching writing is a matter of faith, faith that my students have something to say and a language in which to say it" (Murray, 1982,157).

The key is found in moving from the developmental stage of the writer and responding to the picture or text in a way that is appropriate to that level.

Sharing a writing experience in a cross-age setting with five, six and seven-year-olds illustrates this process. After some pre-writing that consists of a shared story, experiences, and picture-drawing, the writers began to write at the level that fits their developmental response. The teacher too writes for a short time (Another facet of the writing process that is important!) and then begins to move about the room, having brief, mini-conferences with these beginning writers.

With some writers the story is read and a content conference begins to help the writers to expand on their ideas. Others share *what they are thinking/writing about* and possible topics are generated. Others are concerned about conventions within the writing — *how do you spell* — and are referred to key word lists (a pre-writing activity that supplies a base for personal reference) or encouraged to use other techniques

WRITERS' CONFERENCE

1. **Content Conference.** 98% of the conferences between teacher and writer are for content only. This deals solely with the content of the writing. Points to remember:
   a) Let the writer know you have heard. Repeat back what you've heard. b) Look for the story. Sometimes the most important part isn't even on the paper. c) Don't lead the writer where *you* want him to go. d) Teach students to conference with each other.
   Content conferences can create problems with length, lack of focus, etc.
2. **Design Conference.** This allows the teacher and the writer to discuss parts of the work, the overall design of the piece, the structure. Example: Discuss methods of telling the story. Begin with *This is what I see in your design.* Discuss various genres or orders/structures for telling the story, e.g. chronological order, flashback, etc.
3. **Process Conference.** This type of conference deals with the question — *How did you write this?* or *How did you go about this?* Find out where the writer is in terms of drafting. Find out how the writer went about it. Suggest strategies for revision or for next step in the writing process.
4. **Evaluation Conference.** *How do you like what you've written? Is it the best you've done?* Allow the writer to evaluate his/her own writing through the interview. Writers may decide to revise again.

(Adapted from Calkins, 1986)

in their "sloppy copy" that can be changed during revision and/or editing. There are also writers who are using no text and are conveying their ideas through pictures. Again, the response is — *Tell me about . . .* — and ways of adding text in their own words are discussed.

As writers experience the writing circle or the writing conference, regardless of the nature or the developmental stage of the interaction, they begin to develop their own strategies for confering with their peers *and with themselves.* Such a writing classroom is a constantly evolving environment requiring both an internal and an external response of the writing teacher that is natural and appropriate for the learners.

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